



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Gennie Johnson Buller

discussing the **Virgin Sturgeon**

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Gennie Johnson Buller is the daughter of Virgin Sturgeon co-owner John "Jack" Johnson, and worked at the restaurant as a waitress and cook.

[00:00:51]

Gennie: My father John "Jack" Johnson, Laurie Patching, and John Cox purchased the Virgin Sturgeon in 1976 and changed the name from Bob and Dee's to the Virgin Sturgeon. I was 16 and didn't start working there until I was almost 17 as a waitress, and a cook later on.

Anne: So, you opened for business May 1, 1976, so you were there. Well, you were there prior to that, because your dad was co-owner.

Gennie: Yeah, I'd been around, and then I started working there officially when I was almost 17. I started working weekends and for the summer and did all sorts of things there.

Anne: Do you remember Jerry Brown being there?

[00:2:06]

Gennie: I don't think I was ever at the restaurant when Jerry Brown was there. But I know my mother went down one night when he was there. She was very impressed. She was secretary for Senator Rodda at the time, in the Capitol. They are all politically connected. My mom's name was Katherine Johnson. She worked for twenty-five years for Senator Rodda. I think he was one of the oldest senators to serve. He served until he was 93. She worked for him afterwards, too. I knew that he would come down there once in a while, Jerry Brown. I just saw him maybe three or four years ago. He came down. He still looks good. Everybody our age remembers him and got up to shake his hand. He's a very friendly guy.

Anne: According to Laurie Patching's oral history, "we knew the barge was old and had unique problems. It had sunk four or five times before we bought it..."

Gennie: This is the first time I've seen proof that the barge sank previously. [*Gennie is referring to a July 31, 1974, Sacramento Union article about the sinking of the Dirty Harry, which was the name of the barge before it became Bob and Dee's.*] I honestly thought those were river tales. I was good friends for many years with Bob. We called him Crystal Bob because he worked for Crystal Dairy as a milk man. His wife still does my taxes and we're still good friends. Maybe they might have photos. I can ask. They didn't marry until I was working at the Village Marina, later on. He might have had more wives prior to this wife. Dee wasn't even his first wife, I don't think. It was Dee that he had the restaurant with, though. He said he bought it just taking over the debt from Harry. He just took his bills. Harry said, "Here," and signed over the title. His name is Bob Evans, or Evanson. I have his name in my purse. He passed away two or three years ago. He was a character and a half. That's why it was perfect my dad bought it from him, probably very reasonable because it was such an old funky barge. It was just a neat crazy place on the river.

[00:05:25]

I met my husband there. He was 21 and I was 17. He came down to work there. He was always going down to fiddle with the pumps. That thing took on water. Finally, maybe the power went out or a pump failed or something in the night, and that was it. The place was full of food and beer. We got all the beer and wine out. We were coated with grease and getting all sunburnt trying to get all the produce out. That's what we took up to the top and used in the beer garden. The walk-in was close to land so we just handed the stuff up. They used a crane to pull up the refrigeration unit. It sank just prior to the second anniversary celebration.

[00:07:30]

Anne: Laurie mentions, "The first year we were open, we started having live music six nights a week, including Nate Shiner and the Nighthawks, Turtle Dust, and the Robert Cray band."

Gennie: I don't really remember them. The manager's name at that time was Tody. She was interesting. She's a woman, but she could grow a beard. Initially, she would shave it every day, but as time went on and she realized that my dad and the others were pretty liberal, she would let it grow. People came to see the bearded lady and she seemed ok with that.

[00:09:44]

Anne: So, then, this is two days before the big celebration, according to Laurie, "We got the same guys who had raised it previously." And she's given us the names of the divers.

Gennie: I remember a Harry. He was always taking a swig off a bottle. They used a plastic tarp kind of stuff to seal the holes.

[Anne reads from Laurie's oral history about the sinking of the barge]

Gennie: Laurie remembers more than me. I was still in high school. It was right before my graduation and my 18th birthday. I had to go to school that day, it was terrible.

[Anne continues reading from Laurie's oral history, talking about how the Virgin Sturgeon operated temporarily on the levee after it sank.]

[00:11:56]

Gennie: There was a trailer there, but the health department shut us down. We were cooking burgers and selling fries using the grill from the barge, but the health department — you know, you have to have enough sinks to wash your hands and dishes. They came down and shut it down.

Anne: So, how long did you operate on the levee?

Gennie: Just the summer. Just that whole summer until fall when it got too cold. Marvin and I would get bands to come down and play, and we'd just pass the hat. So, beers and sandwiches.

Anne: So, summer of '78.

Gennie: Just the cooking was shut down. We still had bands going, we just served sandwiches and beer and wine. We had the liquor license, so we could still have beer and wine. We just couldn't have burgers.

Anne: Okay, so this is the beer garden. So, Marvin built the shed?

[00:13:55]

Gennie: Well, he modified it. He opened up the front and put sheet rock inside, and put in a window in the back, and we put the beer coolers in there. We got sandwiches from a place downtown that had sprouts on it. I can't remember the name of that little shop. Giovanni's?

Anne: I was thinking you guys made them, but they wouldn't allow you to?

Gennie: The sandwiches? No, you had to be so regulated. These, you would just buy the sandwiches and sell them for a couple bucks. Marvin and I were in charge of that. We ran the beer garden, pretty much. We didn't get paid. We just lived there on our boat for free and ran it all summer. We were kids; it was fun.

[The three women discuss copying Gennie's photos and Anne confirms the spelling of Gennie's name, which is short for Genevieve.]

[00:15:50]

Randee: I was talking to Carl Olson. And I asked him if he knew anything about the place, and he said, "Oh, I used to work there!"

Gennie: Oh, I know Carl really well. He worked there before I did. I voted for him for mayor. I know him and he's a friend and he cares about Natomas so much. Well, I do, too. I've lived here 32 years, since I was a kid.

[Anne continues reading from Laurie's oral history, talking about how the Virgin Sturgeon operated temporarily on the levee after it sank, the other local marinas, and photographs in the exhibit.]

[00:17:30]

Anne: Now you were saying that you were living then on the docks?

Gennie: In 1981, we moved down there, yeah.

Anne: So, in '81 at the Village Marina.

Gennie: Right, summer of '81. Yeah, because I turned 21 in May — May 2, it was right after their anniversary. And then I think it was only a couple weeks later that my dad died. He threw a big 21st birthday for me at the Virgin II on Broadway. And I was working there one night a week, just donating my time.

Anne: You were working at the Sturgeon II?

Gennie: Right.

Anne: Oh good, that's a piece of information.

Randee: And Carl Olson was working down there, too, right? No? He said he was bartending there.

Gennie: If he did, it was probably after me. I think he did after I left. I was only there for a short while, because after my dad died, it was just too difficult. And then shortly after that, I left the marina and we went down to the Village. I had to cut ties with Gloria and everybody. I'd see her from time to time.

Anne: Well, life has to move on. You have to do your thing.

[00:18:40]

[*Anne continues reading from Laurie's oral history, talking about buying the Sacramento Yacht Club barge and its sinking.*]

[00:21:10]

Gennie: Did she give credit to the guys — they were called the Associated Divers? She didn't mention them? They saved her tush many times.

Anne: She mentions the divers that they kept using repeatedly, these friends.

Gennie: Associated Divers. Bob Taylor, he was an old navy guy. And [*name unintelligible*] — what's his last name? This green boat here [*referring to photo*], some guy stopped paying his dockage on it, so they took possession of it. It had an old diesel engine — it could tow anything. It had a really huge engine and they took it over and started a business called Associated Divers. They're the reason that barge was raised. They rented this irrigation pump that was huge.

Randee: Is that that picture we have?

Gennie: Probably.

Anne: Remember the other one that we didn't know what that picture meant? There was just this plain barge coming down the river, and I'm wondering whether or not it was the barge that they put the big crane on like you're showing in that other picture.

Gennie: Well, they had the crane on it already, I believe. That was their business. They would drive pilings and do river work. There were a lot of barges going up and down the river, maybe it was one of those.

[00:23:07]

Anne: So, here, look [*reading from Laurie's oral history*]: "Harry Linton and Bob Taylor, our diver friends."

Gennie: Well, Harry was the one who worked on the first one, but, maybe he was there that day, but I don't really remember. That was so long ago — that was '79. I remember them having this huge orange irrigation pump and just pumping tons of water, and then it just finally popped out of the water, and we were just like, "Oh my god, they did it!" I didn't think they were going to do it. It was crazy!

[*Anne continues reading from Laurie's oral history, talking about the raising of the barge.*]

Anne: [*Reading from Laurie's oral history*] "So then a fire broke out on the barge in the early morning hours of May 4."

Gennie: Yeah, that was terrible. I was living down there on a boat and it was a really windy night. Somebody threw a gas can in it, like rowed up in a rowboat. They found it was arson.

Anne: Oh really?

Randee: I think Debi said they suspected Captain Jack—

Anne: Captain Jim.

Gennie: Yeah, somebody told me recently that Laurie thought it was a disgruntled customer. I don't know how that could be — it hadn't been open for a long time. I don't know who, but somebody who wanted to see it fail, maybe a competitor?

Randee: So they actually did find—

Gennie: I thought they did. I could've sworn the fire department said there was a gas can there. Because there were vents, and you could just row up. And it was a super windy night. I ran up with, like—

Randee: We haven't seen anything in print on that.

Gennie: We had like four fire extinguishers that are heavy. Our dog woke us up, and it was really windy, and we looked out, and I went running up there. But then the first plate-glass window broke, and that was it. The wind just fed the fire. You know, the fire department couldn't get to it very easily. And it was gone. We tried to clean it up. Marvin and I went down and tried to scrape off the black, and thought maybe they could rebuild a building on top of it. We were covered in black stuff forever. He [Marvin] said at the event that they had here, and he first saw you guys, he said, "Oh my gosh, there was a picture of you and me all covered in black stuff. I could not believe it." It was a picture Debi had given you.

[00:26:05]

[The three women talk about Marvin coming to the event, then Anne continues reading from Laurie's oral history, talking about the opening of the Sturgeon II in Midtown, and then Gennie makes a phone call while Anne and Randee discuss Jack Johnson's death.]

[00:29:11]

Anne: So, when did your dad die? This article from May 24 says, "last Sunday."

Gennie: I think it was like the 17th or so, '81.

Anne: Maybe the 16th? Well, we have it somewhere.

Randee: He was pretty young.

Gennie: He was 48. He was way too young. At the time, I thought he was old, when I was only 21. But now I'm 49, and I don't think that was that old.

[00:30:47]

[The three women talk about artist Paul Evans, Virgin Sturgeon chef and manager Donald LaCourse[?], and the exhibit, and then Anne continues reading from Laurie's oral history, talking about Jack Johnson's death, the Sturgeon II, the purchase of the current barge, the placement of the jetway on the levee for use as a gangway, and the re-opening of the Virgin Sturgeon on the river.]

[00:36:00]

Anne: *[Reading from Laurie's oral history]* "The county required us to put it through a stress test — 200 pounds per square inch. Do you remember that?"

Gennie: No, I wasn't there then. I wasn't there anymore in '92. I was down at the Village Marina.

Randee: Where is the Village?

Gennie: It's where the Sierra Foundation is. It was a funky old barge, but it was up on land.

Randee: You mean on the Garden Highway, that arts and crafts building?

Gennie: Yeah, you could walk easily from the Village. B&B Marina turned into Crawdads, this cinderblock building that a couple of firemen and paramedics bought and they were running it and it was called Crawdads. And then the chain Crawdads — the people that bought that stretch of land for millions of dollars put in a huge marina. But before that, there was just a little cinderblock and this local band Lady and the Boys used to play all the time down there. It was so much fun. That was back when I was like 22, 23. We had our first two kids living on our little crappy houseboat, and then I finally dragged my husband off. We had a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old and I said, "I can't do this anymore," so I just went, got an apartment, and said, "We're moving, if you want to join us." Our boat was taking on water, it was old, and we didn't have any money to pull it out. We were so poor. We were young and poor, but it was fun living on the river.

[00:37:53]

Anne: So, Crawdads is now what?

Gennie: Now it's Chevy's, Crawdads, and, originally what was called Woody's, but they closed Woody's and they made it the Blue Gecko, and then they closed the Blue Gecko, and now it's called the Pearl on the River. Crawdads and Chevy's have been there since 1985 or '84?

Anne: *[Reading from Laurie's oral history]* "In August of '84, we opened." Now, were you there then?

Gennie: No, I didn't get back there till '96. I knew everybody down there, so we still — because I was working at a little restaurant in town called the Village Dry Dock. When they closed Village Marina and they sold that property to the Sierra Foundation, a bunch of us that worked there went and worked at a place called Village Dry Dock, because it was on land. I worked down there for a while, and all the people from the Sturgeon would come in. And I worked at Arco Arena. River people are funny — we're all connected for a long time. Restaurant people are, too. I'll see people I worked with 20 years ago at the Marina Inn, and run into them at some other restaurant they're working in.

[00:40:20]

Anne: [*To Randee*] Can you get my datebook out of my purse? I think there's a little message I wrote to myself. This guy I'm working with right now, his buddy — oh here, Marcus Whisenand [?]. We worked at the Virgin Sturgeon. Do you remember a Marcus who was a chef?

Gennie: I worked with a Marcus. He was a waiter, though.

Anne: Ok, maybe he was a waiter first.

Gennie: Now he's teaching at the Coleman Institute[?].

Anne: That's correct. That's this person.

Gennie: I do know him, yeah.

Anne: He's going to write up a little something for us.

Gennie: Oh good. I trained him. I trained him as a waiter there, and he was really good. I trained everybody — every summer when we hire new people. It was a different manager at the time that worked for Laurie, and said, "Gennie, you do it," because I have the most patience, because I have five children. Nobody else wanted to have to do it.

Anne: It's a nice thing to do, to help these people.

Gennie: I'm old. I've been doing this for a very long time.

Randee: I don't think we're old.

Gennie: Well, I'm close.

Anne: So, you came back in 1996, then you worked '96 to 2006, and that was all under Laurie.

Gennie: Bobbie and Renee, who bought it three years ago, they were both managers there at the time. Renee had hired me in '96. She was the general manager and Bobbie was like an assistant manager. And the girl I showed you, Lynn, in that one picture in the cook's outfit, she filled in a lot. She works for FEMA. Still, to this day, she'll come work once in a while if she's not out on some tragedy.

[00:42:38]

Anne: I didn't know Renee's last name — she didn't take Bobbie's last name?

Gennie: No, and I can't think of it either. And her daughter Desi works there now, too, and she worked there way back then. Two of the cooks, Alberto and Jesus, have been there since way back, and they're still there today. That is why our food is so consistent. They are amazing. We were so busy Friday night and those guys are just pounding out the food. I was a cook for years, and I don't know how they did it. Everything's perfect, every little modifier. When Laurie closed it to get all the dry rot done before she sold it over three years ago, everybody thought we closed. And then the economy. She had a lot of dry rot problems. That ramp weighs so much. They counterweighted it with all that sand under the floor and

it dry-rotted everything, because all the moisture would stay in the sand on the wood, and she had to replace that whole back deck.

[00:44:44]

Anne: So, I just was wondering how long it was closed.

Gennie: Before this last time, it was right after Christmas, December—

Anne: So, we know that Bob and Renee opened it in 2007, so they had it then.

Gennie: So, it was from December 2006 to March 2007, three months. I think it's March 28 or 23. It's their anniversary.

Anne: [*Referring to Laurie's oral history*] Here, she says, "I turned over ownership of the Virgin Sturgeon on March 22 to Bob and Renee Riggs." So it was closed. We hadn't really heard that.

Gennie: And I was out looking for work, but I was so picky. It had to be something cool.

Anne: Is that, then, when they did the glass on the bottom?

Gennie: No, they've had that, I think. The glass on the bottom of what?

Anne: Well, the glass window was always on top, but then there were boards that were underneath.

Gennie: Yeah, they did that a while back, though. I don't remember exactly what year. That was probably at least seven years ago or so.

Anne: Okay, I was just thinking that maybe that was part of what happened when it was closed, but it had been done before that.

[00:46:37]

Gennie: They didn't really do that much, except replace all the wood in the back. They periodically put new carpet in and paint and do new linoleum — just things wear out. But I don't remember any drastic changes. They redesigned maybe the waitress station, but nobody sees that.

Anne: Now did you also say, they replaced wood in the back? The back deck?

Gennie: It's that back outdoor area, but it's still upstairs. It's not the back patio. It's just that little —

[*Recording ends abruptly*]